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Ezra and Me and the Boards.

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Mrs. Johnson Loquitur.

"We're plain old-fashioned folks, my husband and me, and we're getting along into years. Ezra is past seventy, and I'm so near it there ain't any fun in it—but we're considerable smart and independent yet, and so we live in our snug little home instead of breaking up and going to live with the children as some folks would. There's more than a fifty-vara lot in the place and plenty of fruit trees and vines, and my roses and geraniums are famous, if I do say it, and Ezra keeps things up in good shape outdoors and me the same indoors, which is the natural Scriptural way according to my thinking. I never did like women doing men's work, nor men women's for that matter. Ezra does offer to wipe the dishes often, but somehow I can't stand to

see him with one of my big gingham aprons on, and he'd get all spotted up if he didn't put it on, which I'd hate to see even worse, and so, there it is. The children are all married and settled, making a fight for a living just as we used to, and they're all steady go-to-meeting folks, I'm thankful to say, and prosperous enough, I guess. Once I was going to have the boys all presidents and the girls riding in coaches, but now I'm just thankful to have them good, plain, honest folks. There's nothing like seventy years to take the nonsense out of a body!

"Yes, we're fixed so that we don't need to worry if we're keerful and don't go into no extravagancies, like keeping two fires or having a fit of sickness. We're used to saving and wearing our clothes forever (I've worn my black straw bonnet ten years, just having Miss Armstrong touch it up now and then, and Ezra—I couldn't tell without reckoning when he had his best Sunday coat), but we always pay our pew rent and help support the causes—that's the way we were both brought up. But goodness me, how the causes do grow and multiply! Once there was only foreign missions and home missions and the Bible society and the tract society, but now

there's the women's boards, too, and the freedmen and the old ministers and Church extension and the Sunday-school and Y. M. C. A. and W. C. T. U., and land knows what. Well, of course we couldn't give only a mite to the old Boards, and the only way we can do anything for all these new causes is to keep crowding on a little more load every time—same as the man that got so he could carry an ox just by beginning with it as a calf. Ezra's a tailor, you know, and he always made a fair sort of living in old times, but what with great stores full of ready-made clothes and such lots of machinery, it got so that all he could do was to repair and fix over things, and he's a master hand at it, if I do say it. It's something I could help about, and every time there was a new cause I'd say, 'Now, I can earn a dollar for that, I guess,' and many's the day I've cleaned and patched and pressed till my back was pretty well used up. Somehow, we've always managed to do something for every single one of the causes. I never could sit in church and have a contribution box shoved right before me and not have a nickel to drop in it. Ezra's the same way, only more so. I do believe he'd feel like going right through the floor if he couldn't always put something

in. Maybe it's habit; if it is, it's a good one, ever so much better than smoking, now isn't it? Maybe it's pride; I wouldn't wonder a bit if it was in my case, but I ain't going to make myself miserable with what my good old mother used to call 'self-examination.' It took her a week to get real cheerful after one of those spells of raking herself over the coals, yet she thought it was her bounden duty to do it at least once in two months. I'm glad we don't have time for it nowadays, for I shouldn't get over it nowhere near as quick as mother did! Well, whatever the motive may be, that's the way Ezra and I feel about the causes.

"But what I started to tell you was not about any of these little regular affairs. It's something a good deal bigger. It's how we've helped about the debts—foreign and home. We always treat the Boards just alike, same as we do the children. We don't believe in debts; that's habit and pride, too, maybe—but we don't.

"Ezra's a great reader; I ain't; I couldn't ever seem to get the time when I was young, and now my eyes have given out considerable, and I shall have to wait for kingdom come before I'm a scholar. But Ezra'd rather

read than eat any day. It's been amazing convenient for me when he had to wait a bit for his dinner or supper. Catch him hurrying or fussing if he could catch hold of a book or paper! So, of course, we've got no end of books, histories, and such. Somebody's always giving them to Ezra—old Elder Harris willed him his books, you know, and when any of our church folks moves away we're sure to get a fresh stock. We take the *Church* and the *Home Mission Monthly*, and *Woman's Work*, and Ezra's sister always sends us the *New York Observer*. I read of them what I can, but Ezra, he just devours them, and so he's what I call a scholar, and when he talks in prayer-meeting folks like to hear him, if I do say it, and he can give illustrations better than lots of ministers. Ezra prays well, too, at meeting and at home, and lives all the same as he prays. If he didn't I wouldn't mention the praying.

"Well, we were thinking and talking a great deal about the debts of the Boards, three years ago this summer, and casting about to see what we could do. Of course I've always had missionary eggs; every fifth egg, is my rule. If the old Jews gave a tenth, pity if the Christians can't give a fifth! And

there's my cherry and apricot trees. Some years they've helped me out ever so much; and there's the rent of our spare room, I always set aside part of that; but what was it all among the causes when each wanted an extra effort, and deserved it, too? It's the extras that make the trouble always. What was left for the debts? On our mite-box it says, 'Freely ye have received,' and I hope I'm not a stock or a stone not to know that I've had mercies enough! Just to be well and breathe, in California, is a pretty big blessing, Ezra says, when he reads about the cyclones and the sunstrokes and the blizzards, back east. But it's when he goes to talking about history that Ezra gets real eloquent. Why, he'll go on by the hour about what the early Christians went through, just to spread the Gospel, and the way they crept here and there with their little rolls of Scripture, even across the sea, into England, among the awfullest heathens that ever was, if they was our ancestors; and about the Waldenses and the Huguenots and the Covenanters. I declare for it, when Ezra gets to telling these stories I feel so worked up I'm ashamed to think I've had my bonnet done over at all. What do I know about self-denial, anyway?

"But to go back about those debts. We haven't had a bit of new furniture for thirty years. Everything's just what we got when we first came to California. Oh, yes, I did get a new rocking-chair for the front room after Eliza was married, and I wanted to rent the room. Then, when mother came to live with us she brought from the old home in Maine the things her mother gave her when she was married—an old cherry desk and an eight-day clock and a spinning-wheel, if you'll believe it—a little old-fashioned flax-wheel, spindle, distaff and all. We thought that was a big joke, but you'll see. We put the wheel up in the loft and the children used to play with it, though grandma kept a pretty sharp watch to see that they didn't break it. I think she always hoped it would come in fashion to spin our own linen again. After mother died, the young folks used to get it down for tableaux and New England kitchens and such things, and once Cora Gillette, the banker's daughter, asked my Eliza if we would sell it, which, of course, Eliza wouldn't listen to—sell grandma's wheel, indeed!

"Talking about the debts—'if we had something we could sell,' says Ezra, and I just laughed, but it fell to telling about the

early Christians living under ground and starving to death till I was sober enough to cry. I always lie awake nights when anything troubles me—foolishest thing in the world to do!—and I was lying awake that night and all at once I thought of the wheel. Of course I hated to part with it, but what was that to be thinking about such a time as this! So in the morning after Ezra went to the shop I got down the wheel and cleaned it and oiled it and rubbed it till it shone, and then I put on my bonnet and went over to Mrs. Gillette's, who is such a genuine lady that nobody is afraid of her, so I just told her I'd like to sell mother's wheel. Miss Gillette was in the room and she joined right in. 'Of course we want it, mamma,' says she; 'do send the man right over for it.'

"'I think I'll step over to Mrs. Johnson's and look at it myself,' says her mother; and so she came home with me, and when we came in she sat down and we had a nice visit. She said right away that she'd take the wheel and would give me ten dollars for it, which I thought a real good price. Then she says, in her soft, beautiful way: 'Dear Mrs. Johnson, you're not in any trouble, I hope, that makes you anxious to sell this wheel?'

"'No,' says I; 'only those Board debts.'

"'Whose debts? What debts?' says she, in a kind of surprised, inquiring voice.

"'Board debts,' says I, and upon my word I had to explain it to her, although she's one of our church members and a most lovely woman, but she never had an Ezra for a husband. Well, when she understood it her great soft eyes filled with tears and she took out her purse: 'Dear Mrs. Johnson,' says she, 'I didn't offer you half enough for that wheel,' and she just made me take twenty dollars!

"It's always Mrs. Gillette's way when she's been doing anything generous to act as if it was nothing remarkable, and so she began to walk around the room and to look at father and mother's pictures and the old clock and the desk. 'You have a fortune in these quaint old things,' says she. 'People give a great deal for them nowadays, but of course you'll never part with them.'

"'No, indeed,' says I, and I felt almost hurt to have her speak of it, but she came and took both my hands in her soft, pretty ones, and kissed me and said she was more grateful to me than she could tell for the wheel and for a lesson, and then she went

away. Poor thing, she's just crowded to death with her big house and her help and her company! It's no wonder she hadn't thought about the debts.

'Well, you should have seen Ezra when he came home and I told him. 'Twenty dollars!' says he. 'Who'd have thought we could give twenty dollars toward the debts?' But we did. I put it in my envelope at our thank offering meeting with this text, which Ezra found for me: 'Thou, O God, hast prepared of thy goodness for the poor.' But there was a gift of a hundred dollars that was taken from another envelope, with this verse:

"'I thank Thee for Thy written Word, my God,
For every sacred line;
But more I thank Thee for Thy humblest saint,
Whose daily life doth shine;
A living page, most true, most pure, most sweet,
Fresh from Thy hand divine.'

"That was Mrs. Gillette's, we all knew. Of course she meant Ezra. Nobody ever thought of calling me a saint!

"Well, a year went by, and if those blessed old Boards wa'n't just as bad off as ever! Some says they ain't managed right, but Ezra says, 'How can they stop spending when they get such letters, not only from missionaries, but from converted heathens?'

"I'd noticed Ezra looking at the desk, and I just felt in my bones what was coming. It would have to go, much as we sot by it, and so it did. We'd kind of planned to give it to son Ezra, but just as like as not there'd have been some hard feeling between him and his brothers about it; so Ezra put all his papers in a bureau drawer that I cleared out for him, and I found places easy enough for all the things I had in the desk, and Mr. Gillette came over himself and gave us twenty-five dollars for it. Of course, we missed it some, but what's that when you think of what you have received? Mrs. Gillette gave a hundred dollars to foreign missions and a hundred dollars to home missions last year, and I'm pretty sure that the Boards are beholden to Ezra for a good share of it, but that's the last thing he thinks of. When son Ezra came to see us last fall he was a little put out about the desk, though afterwards he saw it just as we did; but he went out and bought his father a little writing-table, wonderfully handy.

"And now here is the same old story ringing in our ears again about the debts! There's just one thing left. It did seem for a spell as if I couldn't part with it. I'm a

natural born miser, I am! I was gazing at the clock the other evening, and says I to Ezra: 'What an heirloom this clock is!'

"'Yes,' says he, 'but the gospel is a great deal older and preciouser heirloom, thanks to the missionaries who brought it to England!'

"I was lying awake that night, and got to thinking how I'd been blessed by my godly mother and grandmother, and how glad they'd be to have the old clock spread the gospel, and then the queerest thing happened. The clock began to tick: 'Free-ly, ye-have, re-ceived; free-ly, ye-have, re-ceived!'

"It's kept it going ever since till I'm most crazy. I told Ezra of it this morning, and he says maybe if it went over to Mrs. Gillette's and stood on that broad landing up on her stairs, it might keep on saying the same thing till even Mr. Gillette, who never goes to church, would hear it. Who knows?"

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